DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 869 SO 029 425

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TITLE Ideas from the Other Side of the Desk: Student Evaluations.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Evaluation; Informal Assessment; Instructional Improvement; Questionnaires; Secondary Education; *Social Studies; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; Student Surveys; *Teacher Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS Course Evaluation Questionnaire

ABSTRACT

Student-completed course evaluations are used almost exclusively in collegiate education. This paper proposes the use of student evaluations in secondary education, specifically in social studies, for the purpose of improving teacher and course effectiveness. The paper presents an informal method of student course evaluation by describing a process to create evaluation tools, collect responses, and utilize the data. A sample student evaluation form is attached. (Author/BT)

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# Ideas from the Other Side of the Desk: Student Evaluations.

by Todd Decker

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**Abstract**

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Student completed course evaluations are used almost exclusively in collegiate education. The author proposes the use of student evaluations in secondary education for the purpose of improving teacher and course effectiveness. The author presents an informal method of student course evaluation by describing a process to create evaluation tools, collect responses, and utilize the data.

**Ideas From the Other Side of The Desk:**

**Student Evaluations**

by Todd Decker

Although there is an abundance of literature available on the use and abuse of student course evaluations in colleges, it is difficult to find information on their application in secondary schools. Student course evaluations are standard at a large number of universities but are generally forgotten when it comes to pre-collegiate education.

Quickly perusing the literature I noticed many persons arguing that student evaluations are necessary in considering career advancement and departmental promotion. Today the political application of evaluations has overshadowed their practical use. A great deal of time and resources are wasted creating, distributing, and collecting student evaluations that are not used to improve the teaching of the course. If the teacher does not use the information provided by students, then there is really no need to collect it.

A college professor once warned me, "You are looking for trouble by asking student opinions, be prepared for a blow to your ego." Throughout my student teaching and experience as a secondary history teacher I have ignored the advice of some instructors and colleagues discouraging me from soliciting student evaluation of my teaching. Some of the most poignant and accurate evaluations of my teaching performance have not been given by supervisors but by another sort of educational professional, the students. I struggle to understand why a teacher who is truly trying to do their best would refuse to solicit student evaluation.

The purpose of this article is to describe an informal method of student course evaluation which I have utilized in my teaching experiences. I will present a method of

collecting student opinion in the secondary social studies classroom which is sensitive to the needs of the teacher, respectful of the students, and genuinely useful.

THE FORM

When creating a questionnaire there is only one guideline; design it to fit your needs. If you are trying to improve upon your lessons or classroom management, then ask pointed questions focusing on that particular issue. For example, in a U.S. History class I was teaching I experienced problems with a group of disruptive students. After a few weeks of intervention I placed a question on my quarterly student evaluation form asking "Are behavior problems treated appropriately?" and "How should disruptive students be dealt with?". Student suggestions on discipline were discussed and eventually became class policy. In administering this short survey students were given a voice in creating rules they are expected to obey. It was no suprise for me to find that students were much more likely to comply with rules of their own making than ones which are forced upon them.

The sample form (Figure I) is one that I used for the first evaluation of the school year. My goal in this evaluation was primarily to gather student opinions about general areas of the course. I organized the form into three general topics (Instructor, Assignments, and Lessons) to elicit ideas regarding problem areas which may not be obvious to me as a teacher. I usually conclude surveys with a sentence completion section which requests student commitment to an idea or behavior.

When you are creating your own evaluation form feel free to use any categories you choose. A few tips on creating a form:

- Ask only information which would be useful to your teaching.
- Keep it short and simple.
- Word questions so they require more than a response of simply "yes" or "no".
- Include questions which ask for student commitment to an idea or behavior.

## ADMINISTRATION

My district uses six week marking periods so I find an optimal time to solicit evaluations is the last week of the period. This is an ideal time since many suggestions can be implemented the coming marking period without the difficulties involved in a mid-semester policy change.

In the weeks before distributing surveys I speak with groups of students while they are doing cooperative class assignments. I ask questions such as: What should be changed in this class next six weeks? What do you like most and least about this class? From this "pilot study" I get a good idea of the overriding concerns of students. Armed with this information I can target the questions accordingly. I distribute the evaluation forms a few days before the marking period ends and simply tell the students that I want their honest opinions about the class. I request that they leave names off the form unless they want their identity known for individual feedback. I am quick to explain that an answer of only "yes" or "no" is not helpful, students need to be descriptive and use real examples in order for me to apply their opinions. The time it takes for students to complete my evaluation varies dramatically. I try to arrange this task concurrently with individual seatwork so students are not rushed to complete their forms.

## ANALYSIS

My surveys are from scientifically designed or piloted. I have never computed any statistics or tabulations on student surveys and have never reported the results to anyone but the students in my classes. To do anything else would be missing the point. These surveys are for one purpose, keeping courses student centered.

After reading student responses I spend a class period discussing the results with the class. I read quotes from surveys, solicit student opinion, and share my own thoughts. I derive

a list of practical suggestions from the surveys, share them with the students, and ask for their assistance in implementation.

## CONCLUSION

I can attest to the effectiveness of using the simple process of student evaluations in the secondary social studies classroom. The use of this tool has improved my instruction as well as my sensitivity and responsiveness to student concerns. Although evaluations could never take the place of effective communications with students they provide an effective means to draw forth opinions and suggestions which might not otherwise appear.

**Figure I: Sample Student Evaluation Form**

**Please complete the following sentences:**

1) The best thing about this class is

2) The worst thing about this class is

3) To make this class more enjoyable, I will

4) My personal goal for this class is

5) My favorite types of assignments are

6) The teacher of this class is

7) The most fair way to determine grades is

8) Discipline in this class is

9) The teacher of this class should

10) If I could change one thing about this class it would be

11) So far in this class I have learned

12) The thing that would help me learn the most in this class is

13) Something that would encourage me to do excellent work is